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The Chestatee Review

Spring 1997

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Volume I
Spring 1997

Gainesville College
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The Chestatee Review

It is said that literature helps us grow, both personally and intellectually; it provides an objective base for knowledge and understanding; it links us with the broader cultural, philosophic, and religious world. Guest author Steve Stern said, "Literature defines the human conditions and speaks to the human heart and makes this sort of marriage, shotgun or otherwise, between heaven and earth."

I take genuine delight in introducing the first edition of *The Chestatee Review*. This is an anthology of writing that tells stories, dramatizes situations, expresses emotions, and analyzes and advocates ideas expressly written by Gainesville College Students.

With the introduction of the creative writing program, the quality and quantity of literature produced by students outgrew the scope of *Perceptions*, which in the past three years has won three Southern Literary Festival prizes. *The Chestatee Review*'s focus is on quality student writing, which should make such an impression that the work, as Hemingway suggested, becomes a part of the reader's experience. The Cherokee word *Chestatee*, also the name of a local river, means a place of light. I hope readers will be enlightened by more than a few of these works and will perhaps find occasion to laugh, shudder, marvel -- in short, be moved, and maybe a little haunted by some of the lives represented here.

I would like to thank Tom Sauret for the liberty to follow my heart in the selection and design of this magazine and the English professors that lent me an ear to test these new waters. I would also like to say farewell to Dr. Foster Watkins and thank him for his support of Gainesville College and the literary community.

Alfred Barker

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*This issue of The Chestatee Review
is respectfully dedicated to the memory of*

Ann Matthews Purdy
18 August 1944 -- 22 October 1996

Assistant Professor of English, 1974 -- 1996
Coordinator of Developmental Studies, 1995 -- 1996

Teacher, colleague, raconteur, and friend.

Oblations

Micki Licciardi

Just minutes into the plane ride, the “fasten seat belt” sign went off with a soft *ping*, and your mother was up and headed for the lavatory, clutching her stomach and mumbling about motion sickness. You immediately pressed the call button and requested a ginger ale from the steward. “It’s for my mother. She says the ginger helps settle her stomach,” you explained with that charming inflection in your voice that both reassures that you acknowledge the terrible inconvenience, but also must insist on the absolute urgency of your request. I turned back to my magazine, knowing that the ginger ale would appear momentarily whether the beverage cart was prepared or not. “No thanks, nothing for me,” I said under my breath.

I wanted to believe that you knew what you were doing, to believe that you were right about her coming to Italy with us. You insisted that this would be her last chance and that you would never forgive yourself if we went without your mother. “I’m her only child,” you argued. “She’s a lonely widow; and her health is failing.” Any protest from me sounded petty and mean-spirited against your superior moral stand.

I grew up in a crowded and noisy family with six siblings. The devotion between you and your mother seemed strange to me. My parents were harried and busy. The only time they seemed to slow down was when they were together, and then an eerie silence would fill the spaces around them. The silence would grow so large that it shut out everything around them, including us children. My parents didn’t need

me; they had each other and were even now probably off making love somewhere. Unlike my girlfriends who would squeal with embarrassment at the thought of their parents "doing it," I would always smile in bemusement, never doubting that they were all over each other every chance they got. In fact, the family joke was to remember the loud opera records playing every Sunday morning. It didn't dawn on all of us until we were older that the music blared not simply for the enjoyment of opera, but to drown out the sounds of passion from behind my parents' bedroom door. God, I wanted a love like that! I wanted us to be completely devoted to each other even in our old age. I wanted this trip to Italy to be filled with our passion, with our lovemaking that reverberated down to my bones. I wanted you to shatter me and put me back together, again and again.

But your mother was all alone and needed you, and so our plans for the trip began to include her more and more, and I slowly gave up the fight, convinced that had I refused, you would have canceled the trip rather than tell her "no." I promised myself to make an effort, one more time, to get along with this maddening woman who, after all, gave birth to the love of my life.

Our first stop was the seaside village where your mother and father honeymooned. At the beach she and I waded out to waist-high, cobalt-blue Mediterranean water and faced each other and smiled thinly before turning to gaze at you snorkeling by the cliffs. The neon-orange tip of your snorkel stood out like a periscope, and I imagined you flipping over and looking at us through it -- spying on these two women who shared a vast ocean vista but stared at your vulnerable back instead. I wondered if the waves might force you against the rocks.

"He's getting too close to the rocks," your mother said.

"He's fine," I replied. Then, taking a gulp of clean, ocean air, I said, "It's okay. Tony knows what he's doing."

"Annie, look! He's gone, I can't see his snorkel!" Your mother moved farther away from me, inching closer to your direction, as though she wanted to strike out in a strong swim and rescue you. The waves rolled in and slapped her around the stomach in protest of having to encounter her purple and green-suited girth; but your mother stood fast, oblivious to their screaming and foaming slaps at her, and they sighed and moved on around and behind her, belittled to half their original size.

"It's okay, Mum. He's just spotted something and has gone under to take a closer look."

Not believing me, she lifted both arms, and for a moment I thought she might actually do it: she might throw herself across the surface of the salty water and swim to you. In one flash, I imagined her swift and sure strokes carrying her quickly to you, where she would dive down and disappear for a moment, then surge up out of the water with you cradled to her bosom. But her arms stopped beside her head, and she shaded her eyes against the glare of the sun and searched the water for you. With her eyes hidden from me, I stared at her flabby upper arms and her protruding belly. I marveled that a person could look both bloated and deflated at the same time.

"Oh, there he is!" she yelled as she spotted the snorkel breaking the surface of the water again.

"I'm hungry! Ready for that prosciutto and cheese?" I asked her.

"You go ahead and eat. I'll wait here and watch Antonio."

"Mum, he'll be out there for a long time yet. Come and sit with me;" I winked at her. "You can tell me about what you and Dad did on this beach. . . ."

"No, you go ahead," she interrupted and gave a

dismissive wave of her hand. "Get the food ready; my Antonio will be hungry soon."

"*Your* Antonio," I muttered as I pushed my way through the water toward shore.

The next day we took the train to Florence. The jumble of ancient architectures drew us out to the narrow streets. We gazed at intricately patterned marble walls and ran our fingers along tooled brass doors. My nostrils filled with the pungent odor of strong espresso from the many cafes until the taste of coffee rested on my tongue. The church towers and *duomos* seemed to prop up the sky. We lingered at an open-air market on our walk to the Uffizi Museum. You and I looked at the lovely leather goods displayed in stalls set up on the plaza, while your mother haggled prices over some supposed holy relic.

"What cute sandals." I turned my foot this way and that as I tried one on.

"Cute feet," you whispered and put your arms around me and squeezed. You leaned down and the sun cut a path across your face and lit up your green eyes. I could see the promise of a beard on your face: the tiny hairs beginning to emerge after so many hours post-shaving. They were black, and your skin looked peppered. I wanted to look at you for hours.

"Mmm, I love you too, Tony."

The vendor smiled knowingly at us.

"You'll be sorry after we walk the gardens at Pitti Palace," your mother said as she approached the stall. "You need shoes like these." And she stuck out her foot, covered in sensible but ugly walking shoes.

I looked at you and gestured for the wallet. You hesitated before dropping your arms from around my waist. Then you reached into your pocket and reluctantly handed it to me.

"Too expensive," your mother spat out. "They'll be cheaper in Rome."

I marveled resentfully at her robust energy as we trekked through the streets of Florence. I attributed it more to her incredible stubbornness than her sensible shoes. We stopped at a church on the way to the museum, and I saw her veiny legs and swollen feet as she removed her shoes to make her way up a stairway inside the church. The steps were filled with pilgrims going up the stairs on their knees as a sacrifice to the Virgin Mary. At the top of the stairs was an altar, and I saw the candlelight from the votive candles flickering against the statue of the Holy Mother.

"It's a good Catholic's holy duty," she said, looking pointedly at me and holding her shoes out for you to take.

"Mum, really. It's too much. You don't need to do this. We'll go to mass at Saint Peter's when we tour Rome," you urged her.

But she turned toward the stairs, made the sign of the cross, kissed her rosary beads, and knelt on the bottom step.

"Look at her, at all of them," I sighed to you. "They think they can buy God's favor."

You and I had talked about religion often, and you agreed that it wasn't something important to you. We were members of the "C & E Club" the first year of our marriage, attending services only on those holiest of holy days, Christmas and Easter. But then she began calling you to take her to Sunday mass from time to time, then every week. At first you laughed when I teased you about going through the contortions of the Catholic service -- the constant sit-stand-kneel ritual. But one day you looked at me with a little frown and said, "It's important to her, Annie."

I saw you frown then as you watched your mother slowly make her way up the steps. She lifted her knees one at a time, and her bulky hips followed obediently.

"Do you think she should do this, Annie?"

"It's okay," I reassured you. "Your mother loves this stuff."

Later that day we walked lazily through the Uffizi with our heads close together, my arm linked through yours, my fingers running circles across the texture of your shirt. I loved the way your thick forearms shot out of the rolled-up shirt sleeves, the sun-darkened skin and black hairs contrasting with the crisp, white cotton.

Painting after painting of the Madonna and Child lulled us into a trance at the museum. Suddenly we realized that your mother wasn't with us. "She just stopped to rest," you said. "We'll backtrack."

I wanted you to see her the way I did. How strong she was and the way she manipulated you. But your eyes moved swiftly back and forth across the room, willing one of the museum tourists to be her. You reached for my hand, removed it from your arm, and turned toward the doorway of the small gallery.

"She did this deliberately to get your attention, Tony." I grasped your arm again and looked up at you. I knew that had you been walking arm-in-arm with *her*, she would still be right beside you.

"No, she's tired from those stairs today." And you shrugged me off again and walked quickly toward the hallway to find your mother.

It took us thirty minutes to locate her. Seated on a viewing bench she had a beautiful child hugged to her side, chattering in Italian to the boy's disheveled mother. She looked so happy; it was like the countless paintings of the Madonna, and a rush of near-affection swept over me for this energetic woman.

"Mum, we were worried about you," I smiled and placed one hand on her shoulder and the other on the little boy's head.

"Well, you can't appreciate the beauty of all of this art when you go so fast!"

I deliberately held my smile in place and said "*Buongiorno*" to the boy.

"*Buon-giorrrno*," she corrected me, rolling her R's. "Tell her, Antonio," she prompted you.

Ignoring me, you bent down toward your mother and smiled, placed your palm gently on her cheek and said, "*Que bella facce*." My hands dropped into clenched fists when I heard you say our love words to her: "What a pretty face." She playfully slapped at your hand and turned down her mouth in a girlish pout.

"We can go back to see Michelangelo's *David* one more time, Tony," I suggested.

To finally view the sculpture in person was one of the reasons we went to Florence. The statue held a special meaning for us ever since the first time we made love, and I insisted that you were sculpted like the *David*o.

You turned to look at me then, and I saw the memory of that first time spread a slow smile across your face. I grinned and turned my head to look at you out of the corner of my eye. "*Bad girl...*" you mouthed.

"Antonio, my stomach. It doesn't feel so good," your mother sighed.

"We better get to the hotel," you said to me, and the memory vanished from your eyes. Then to your mother, "Maybe we shouldn't walk all the way back. Do you want me to get a taxi tonight, Mama?"

Back in our room, I removed my little sandals and rubbed my aching feet before placing the shoes into the bottom of my suitcase, knowing that I wouldn't wear them again on this trip.

"Sometimes, she's actually right," I mused aloud.

"What?" you asked as you entered our room.

"Nothing, Tony. How's your mother?"

"She's already asleep. She was exhausted."

"Uh huh." I lowered my head and put a fingernail between my teeth and smiled up at you. "I'm going to take a shower, Tony." I paused long enough to tease you. "You coming?"

"Mmmm, sounds *good*," you answered and began undressing, keeping your eyes on me.

"Well, I certainly won't need this in the shower, now will I?" I pulled my sun dress over my head and tossed it onto the bed. "Or this." I unhooked my bra and let it slide slowly down my arms. Still looking into your eyes, I began to shimmy out of my panties. "Or *these*."

"God, Annie," you breathed as you tugged at your clothes.

I smiled and walked toward the bathroom, then turned back to you and crooked my finger for you to follow.

Later in bed I felt your breath on my neck as you held me against you, our legs entwined, one hand cupping the heaviness of a breast, the other drawing little circles on my neck. As I drifted off to sleep, you told me that you were going to take me to the Ponte Vecchio the next day and buy me something to remember this trip by. I think I dreamed of the famous shop-crowded bridge, covered with jewelry stores. "A ring," I said sleepily. "I want a new ring, Tony."

"A ring it shall be, little lover. . . ."

But the next morning, your mother stayed in bed. She said her stomach hurt too much. You frantically called the hotel desk and found a doctor who would come there to see her. "Old Italy," I thought with relief. At least we didn't have to find a hospital. I was disappointed about our excursion, but I thought that we could go later that night; the shops would close for a few hours in the afternoon for

everyone to eat a late lunch then reopen in the evening for business.

"Let me check on her, Tony. You go get us some coffee and pastry."

"Good idea. I'll be back before the doctor arrives."

I quickly finished dressing and knocked softly on the door to your mother's room. I wasn't surprised to see her dressed and sitting on the side of the bed. "I want to be presentable to the doctor," she said as she saw me look her over.

"Mum, are you feeling better?"

"Better? What do I know from better? I hurt all the time. Here. . . ." She touched a hanky to her stomach and glanced at me.

"Maybe you'll feel better later, and we can still go shopping," I replied, ignoring her try for sympathy.

"And here," she said as she placed a clenched fist between her large breasts. I looked directly at her eyes, and we each held our place without moving. I heard the maid's cart as it rolled along the marble floor down the hallway, then the tentative knock on a nearby room door. "*Si, si,*" a deep voice answered. "*Andiamo.*"

"*Let's go,*" I heard. "Let's do this thing, right *now,*" I thought. But then you entered the room, smiling and carrying flaky baklava and coffee. You were grinning and held out the food as if you'd just come from a hunt and this was your kill. You stood proudly, rocking a little on the balls of your sneakered feet. A lock of thick, black hair had fallen across your forehead, and you absently blew at it with your mouth. Your jeans were tight around your hips and crotch, and my whole body reached out to you as though pushed by a tiny, mysterious wind.

Your mother looked away from me and slowly lowered her body back down in bed with a sigh. "Antonio, such a good boy. Sit, sit." And you placed the food in my

outstretched arms as you took her hand and sat beside her.

I knew she would soon be eating, insisting on tiny nibbles, just to settle her stomach. But eating at least one entire pastry. "Listen, you two," I said. "I can't really help with anything here. I think I'll go on to the Ponte Vecchio. It's supposed to be an easy walk from the hotel." I could not watch the two of you for another moment.

"Well, if you think that's best," your mother said.

"Really, Annie. The doctor will be here soon," you protested.

"No, no. Let her go, Antonio. She shouldn't miss out on account of me," your mother insisted.

I skipped asking the hotel clerk for directions, not wanting to wrestle with our equally atrocious renditions of each other's language, and instead followed a little map I purchased at a kiosk near the hotel. I went directly to the famous bridge, letting the walk calm me as I once again fell under the spell of this beautiful city. I was enchanted with the bridge's storybook structure swelling over the Arno river and crowded with stone-block buildings in varying hues of sun-bleached tans and yellows. The skinny road between the shops was asphalt, but the sidewalks were cobbled and already crowded with shoppers. I browsed the window displays, admiring the delicate filigree of this piece and chuckling over the gaudy thickness of that piece. Then I saw the most beautiful little ring. I rang the bell on the shop door and in a moment it was opened by a smiling old man.

"*Viene, viene dentro*," he said with a little bow.

I was admitted to the inner sanctum of a famed Florentine jeweler's. The old man bestowed a beneficent smile on me and swept his arm outward as though to say, "Behold!" I stifled the sudden gigglish urge to genuflect and went to the window to point out the ring I wanted to see as the door clicked shut and locked. "*Si!*" he exclaimed behind me as though he fully expected me to come along and choose that

exact ring at precisely that moment. He went behind the counter and opened a drawer, withdrawing a velvet bag. He took my hand and held it up in front of his eyes. His generous eyebrows met in a squint, looking like a furry gray caterpillar crawling across his forehead.

"*Si, si,*" he proclaimed and opened a box of rings he took from the bag.

There it was. I knew that the store would size it to fit my finger to pick up another day, but I only wanted to try it on. I held my breath as he smiled and slipped the ring onto my finger. "Oh," I gasped as I felt the gold encircle my skin. It was perfect.

"*Bellissima,*" the jeweler pronounced as I held up my hand to admire the garnet and gold setting.

"*Si,*" I whispered. I thought about you and me coming back here and my showing you the ring. Just then a little buzzer went off, and the door was opened to admit a young couple who entered laughing and holding hands. I dropped my hand and began to slide the ring off.

"*Signora?*" the jeweler asked.

I stopped and pushed the ring back onto my finger. "*Si. Melo prendo.*" I'll take it.

I wandered back toward the hotel, stealing looks at my new ring. In and out of the *vicos* I walked. The smell of garlic and basil and fish was trapped in the thin alleys of these ancient neighborhoods. Children played outside doorways, and women scrubbed stone steps on their hands and knees with water and a hard bristle brush. "*Buongiorno,*" everyone greeted me. Just outside of a doorway, a young woman stood behind an aged man who sat in a wooden chair. He had a towel around his shoulders, and a bony and spotted hand clasped it at his neck as the girl snipped away at his hair with a small pair of scissors. Across the *vico*, which was only about twelve or fifteen feet wide, a woman chattered to them from her kitchen window. The man grunted and began to

talk. His free hand gestured wildly as though punctuating his sentences with exclamation marks. The girl held the scissors and comb in midair and waited patiently for him to finish before taking another snip at his hair. At the end of the *vico* was a church. A young man held the door open for an old woman who walked slowly from the darkened church into the glare of the day. She closed her eyes against the sudden light, and the man clasped her arm at the elbow and began slowly to lead her down the narrow lane.

Many doors along the *vico* stood wide open, and I peered in as I walked past. The bottom floors of these three- or four-storied structures were now mostly kitchens but were once used to keep the family livestock, the cows and goats and chickens. The story of the apostles and the Last Supper in the "upper room" came alive for me as I realized that the floors above the animal room were once the family living quarters. When did it all change, I wondered. I tried to imagine you living here, growing up here. But you were too American. I didn't see you fitting in here, entrenched in these narrow places.

Soon, I realized that I was lost. My map didn't show the tiny enclaves of these little streets. I asked several people for directions to the hotel, but the words became a jumble as they tried to gesture where to turn left or right to get through the tangled *vicos*. I stopped at a cheese shop on a busy corner to use their phone. A man leaned against the wall outside the shop. "*Bellissima!*" he sighed as I walked past. Ignoring him, I pushed the shop door open.

"Tony, I'm lost. I can't find my way out of here, and I can't understand the directions."

"Annie, don't worry, hon. Just call a taxi to come get you. In fact, I'll call one for you from here. What street are you on?"

I looked out the door and saw a sign riveted high up on the building across the street. "*Senso Unico,*" I read to

you. There was a pause, and then suddenly you roared with laughter. "What? What is it?" I couldn't imagine what was so funny.

"Mama, listen to this," you said and you spoke to her in rapid Italian. I heard my name and the words "senso unico" followed by your mother's peal of laughter.

"Oh, Annie! That means "one way"! You're looking at a traffic sign!" Your mother's laughter continued in the background.

"Just call the damn cab, Tony. I'm at a cheese shop. It's called "*di Roberto*"....did I say *that* right?"

As I walked back outside to wait for the taxi, I saw the man again. "*Bellissima!*" he sighed to every woman under fifty who walked past.

I glared at him. "*Bafoungoule,*" I said and gave him the American middle finger.

Back at the hotel, you opened the door and grinned. I stepped into your arms, and we both chuckled over my street sign mistake. "Mama got a good laugh over that one," you said.

"How is she?"

"She's okay. She's resting. The doctor said it was just an upset stomach. He gave her some medicine and told her to watch the pastries."

"Uh huh."

"Annie, I'm worried though. I'm going to insist that she get some tests done as soon as we get back home. She has a stomach ache all the time."

"I know, Tony. I know. It's very convenient when they occur, too."

You backed away and looked down at me with hurt in your eyes. "Geez, Annie. She's an old woman. She's all alone. I'm her only child, you know."

"I know that too, Tony. I can't argue with you about

that. You saw her going up those stairs on her knees, though. She doesn't let her stomach interfere with her religious life--ever! She's so strong, Tony. She is fine, just *fine*. Can't you see that?"

"I worry, that's all," you sighed.

We'd had this conversation so many, many times. "Well, you might want to worry about other things." Like us, I thought. I held out my hand to you. I wanted you to hold me and listen to me. I wanted to tell you my worries about *us*.

"Hey, that's gorgeous!" You took my extended hand and examined the ring. "I guess I ought to worry! That must have cost some pretty lire."

"Oh, my new ring! Isn't it beautiful?" I dropped the painful subject of your mother. It wasn't going away, after all. And this was Italy. And I loved you desperately.

The next day we went to Rome. At your mother's insistence, we visited the Catacombs first. They were eerie and suffocating. As we walked through the labyrinth, your mother kept one arm linked through yours, the other one suddenly rising to make a hasty and reverent sign of the cross from time to time. We followed the guide who spoke with wonder as she pointed out this burial shelf and that body alcove where the persecuted Christians stored their saintly dead. The swiftly spoken Italian became even quicker and more excited as we descended deeper into the bowels of this holy place. I heard another voice ahead and caught words of English. "Tony, I'm going up ahead. That guide is speaking English," I said, and I made my way forward and joined that tour group.

The sparse and artificial light buzzed and chirped and threw strange shadows on the guide. I imagined that her flesh had fallen away and that I could hear the bones of her hands and arms click as she gestured like a mad Italian skeleton.

"God, I need some fresh air," I said to the tourist beside me. I pushed my way through the thick clusters of awed believers, making my way back upward until finally seeing daylight ahead. Outside, I went to the snack truck and bought an expensive bottle of water that was sold like a souvenir at every tourist spot. "*Uno acqua gassata.*" I opened my carbonated water and sat on a stone wall near the exit of the catacombs.

"*Sansa gassata,*" I imagined your mother warned me. "The gas will bother you later," she would say as she shook her finger at me.

I dug out my sunglasses from my bag and put them on against the bright sunshine of that perfect spring day. I watched the people while I waited for you and your mother. I studied my ring from time to time. It really was lovely, but I wished that we had picked it out together.

When she saw the ring that morning, your mother had sniffed, "I could have gotten a better price. You never pay them what they ask!"

"The money doesn't matter," you said to her.

"Antonio, they know she is American. They gave her the highest price!"

"Calm down, Mama."

She looked at you, and her hand went to her stomach. "I just want to help."

You glanced at me, then said, "Mama, we stayed here all day yesterday because you were ill. Annie wouldn't have been alone at the jeweler's if you had felt better."

I was stunned. Your mother was silenced. Both of us stared at you until you smiled and broke the spell. "*Andiamo!* To the Catacombs, you two ladies!"

I looked at the ring again glinting in the sun and thought that it was worth every lire.

Suddenly there was a commotion at the exit area of the tombs. People were rushing out and turning back to look

at something behind them. Then I saw you both emerge from the crowd which parted to let you through. You walked with your arms around your mother, supporting her as she bent over clutching her stomach. You saw me and motioned for me to come over.

"Now what?" I thought. I deliberately put the cap back on my water bottle, stuffed it into my bag, took off my sunglasses and put them into the bag, then took a deep breath and got up from the stone wall.

"She's really hurting, Annie. The guide went to call a taxi." You looked panicked and lost. One of your arms encircled her waist where both of her arms wrapped around her stomach. Your other hand clutched her elbow with a firm grip. I watched your hands nervously squeeze and release, squeeze and release.

"Ooo," your mother moaned. "Antonio."

"Mama, sit over here with Annie and wait for the taxi. I'm going back in to use the phone to call the doctor to meet us at the hotel again."

I thought about yet another day wasted, missing the Colosseum, which we were supposed to visit next, going back to the hotel and waiting for your mother to decide when she was well enough to get out of bed again. God, I hated her then. I hated you both.

"Sit here, Mum," I said. "Go ahead, Tony. Go call the doctor."

You slowly lowered her onto the wall but still clutched her hand. "I'll be right back, Mama. Annie will take care of you." You looked at me with wide eyes, pleading and imploring me to be good to her. To love her as you did. I searched your face and saw two open mouths in the center of your hungry eyes.

"Just go, Tony. She'll be fine."

You hesitated and didn't release her hand.

"I'll take care of her!"

"Thanks, Annie. I love you. Mama, hang on; I'll be right back."

We both watched your back as you rushed into the catacombs to get the guide. "He's such a good boy," your mother sighed.

"Yes, he is a good man," I said.

Your mother straightened a little but continued to hold her arms around her stomach. I reached into my bag and pulled out my water. I unscrewed the cap and took deep gulps. The bubbles burst in my mouth like tiny worlds exploding. "Aaah," I said and put the cap back on.

"Annie, that's carbonated! You should have gotten *sansa gassata*! You'll be sorry later."

I froze with my hand in my bag and stared at her.

"You're a real piece of work, you know that Mum?"

She shrugged her shoulders and looked out at the crowds. "I'm just saying..."

"Oh, I know what you're saying. I know what you're doing, too." I thrust the water into my bag and pulled out my sunglasses. I stood and looked down at her. She was old and alone all right. But I was young and tired of being lonely.

"Really, Annie. You'll get a bad stomach like me. You should watch what you eat. And drink," she said, pointing to my bag where I had stowed the water bottle.

"Mum, you really should watch what you say. You should watch yourself. *Just watch it.*" I didn't like the ominous tone in my voice, but I wanted her to know that I was willing to fight for you.

Your mother sniffed and turned to the snack truck. I waited, knowing she wanted something, knowing she was weighing the possibility of eating a snack against the probability of my knowing her stomach pain was a ruse.

She glanced at the truck again then turned to face me. "You know, the catacombs are beautiful, Annie. Those little niches. It doesn't take much space for a body to lie down."

"Those are for the *dead*, Mum," I said quickly. I didn't like the turn of the conversation. "But such a little space to take up. . . ."

"Don't." I felt my breath leave me in a sudden gush. I looked back to the catacombs for a sign of you. Anything to keep her from saying what I thought she was going to say. I couldn't even contemplate a "space" in our home for her. Not even to lie down in.

"Antonio is such a good son," she said. I looked at her sitting there so comfortably, waiting for your return just as I was. My stomach clenched into a tight ball, and I fought off the urge to wrap my arms around it.

"Tell the doctor '*buongiorrno*' from me!" I pushed my sunglasses on and gave her a smile that was thin enough to slip into a wallet. "I'm going to the Colosseum."

When I returned to the hotel that evening, you were in her room next door. I readied for a shower before dinner, listening for you to come back. Soaping up, I tried to wash away the ugliness of the day and concentrate on the beauty and wonder of the Colosseum. But I kept seeing images of the Christians slaughtered there. Stubborn and believing to the end, giving up their very lives in the name of their faith. I marveled at that kind of devotion. And I thought of the catacombs where their fellow believers furtively buried the martyred bodies. I wondered if it was worth it.

"Annie?" I heard you call.

"Hang on," I yelled back after turning the shower knobs. I wrung out the water from my hair and wrapped a towel around myself.

"What the *hell* do you think you did this afternoon?" Your face was suffused with blood, and you towered over me.

I felt my own face fill with blood, and my skin came alive with goose bumps. "Don't threaten me! Back off!"

"Dammit, Annie! You left her sitting out in the sun

all alone, and her so sick!"

"Tony, you don't get it. She's not sick! She's using that to take you away from me. To keep you all to herself." I hated the whine in my voice.

"Bullshit! She told me that you had a fight over your *water*! She said she just told you to be careful of the bubbles. And you went crazy."

"Oh, is that what she told you?" I went to my suitcase and pulled out some jeans and a t-shirt. I flung them on the bed and turned to face you. "What's she doing right now, Tony?"

"She's resting."

"And what did the doctor say this time?"

Your shoulders slumped, and you looked away from me. "He said she's just overdoing it. He said the sun and all that walking are too much for someone her age," you replied in a near whisper.

"And?"

"And what?"

"Did you explain to the doctor that she got sick down in the catacombs, out of the sun? Did you tell him that just a few days ago she was crawling up church steps on her knees and loving it?" I held the towel with one hand and began to stab the air with the other. "Tony! Look at us! We spend less and less time together. I am alone too much. She's deliberately keeping us apart! Don't you see that?"

"Annie, don't do this. You know she's old. . . ."

"Old and alone. I know, I know. Did you tell the doctor that she only gets sick after we make love, or when you aren't paying enough attention to her? Or too much attention to your wife?" I felt a surge of fresh breath rise from deep in my lungs, and I realized that I had been dreading saying out loud what I wanted you to see for yourself. But the whine was gone from my voice, and I felt energized and righteous.

"God, Annie. I want to be with you. I really do. It's just so hard to leave her when she's in pain." You ran a strong hand through your thick black hair and looked up at me. "Annie, I love you. I love you. I just don't know what to do. . . ."

You sat there in a kind of stunned trance. I watched your face and saw a shadow there. But the shadow came from inside of you. I reached out and brushed your cheeks gently, as though I could simply wipe the darkness away. I wanted to touch you for hours, but I knew that any moment your mother would summon you. . . and you would dutifully go to her.

"Just do what you have to do, Tony," I said softly. I reached around you and grabbed my clothes and went to get dressed in the bathroom.

You were still sitting motionless on the bed when I came out. Your legs were spread, and your hands hung between your knees loosely, like a puppet with broken strings. You lifted your head and said, "Annie, we need to talk."

"Yes."

"It's my mother," you began. Your voice was heavy with pain. So much raw emotion was on your face that I had to look away. "She shouldn't be alone all the time. . . ."

My hand snapped up, palm outward. "Don't! Don't, Tony. Please, don't say it."

I looked at you then, and our eyes met in a mutual plea that tore at my heart. I saw your jaw tighten until the muscle there began to twitch. I felt I would burst, or collapse, or scream.

"I'm going to take a little walk." I paused long enough for that to register. "You coming?"

"Annie," you groaned and shook your head. "I can't leave her like this."

"Fine then," I said and grabbed my bag and walked out.

I wandered down the crowded and noisy streets, ending up in the *vicos* again. I saw a door to a church, and I pushed on it. Inside, the silence and flickering candlelight engulfed me. It was empty except for a few old women with bent backs who knelt in the front pews, their heads covered with a scarf or a bobby-pinned hanky. I walked forward through the vestibule. Statues of saints lined the walls, their lips pursed in mock benevolence. Their eyes gazed down at the dozens of burning candles around their feet, lit in hopes of answered prayer. Saint Jude, Saint Michael, Saint Anthony. I stopped and thought about the irony of your being named after the patron saint of lost things. As a child I often prayed to Saint Anthony to help me find a misplaced toy. Even as an adult I would automatically think of seeking the saint's intervention when I lost my car keys or a phone number.

"Why not?" I thought, and I knelt on the tiny, worn bench. Candles burned at various heights, each flame standing for someone's prayer that the saint would help retrieve something lost. I reached into my bag for coins to put in the tin box to buy a candle. But the first thing I touched was the bottle of water still wedged down there. *Acqua gassata*, I heard your mother say. My hand went around it, and I drew it out of the bag slowly. I looked at the statue and the candles, and I wished with all of my being that I believed.

I unscrewed the cap of the bottle. Then I turned it upside down and poured it over the flames. Most of them only flickered and sputtered, sending a tiny uprising trail of smoke. But, as I shook every last drop of water from the bottle, I managed to put out a few, quenching the burning flames.

"*Dio mio*," I gasped and fled from the church.

I rushed back through the *vicos*, my mind racing with

images of you and her. I again took the tiny alleys, but instead of the charm and quaintness of the place, I saw the dirty ropes strung with laundry. I smelled the dank stones and rotting wood. I heard babies cry and old people shout; couples argued; mothers yelled at children. The closely wedged buildings rose against the encroaching night, blocking out the setting sun so that it was darker than the hour indicated. It was suffocating, and I felt penned in. I wanted to escape this ancient world, and my desperation carried me automatically toward the hotel. To you.

But once again, you weren't in our room. Once again, you were with her. I dropped my bag onto the bed and sat down. I reached to dial the telephone and saw my ring perched on my hand. I imagined the setting squeezing the blood-red garnet, squeezing so tightly that the gem pops out of its setting and falls away, leaving the spiny prongs behind, grasping upward in supplication at the empty air. I slowly pulled the ring off my finger and set it beside the phone on the little bedside table.

I dialed the airport and changed my reservations. Then I called for a cab. I gathered my clothes and toiletries strewn about our room and shoved them into my suitcase. I left you a note. But I wanted to see you one more time.

I didn't knock on your mother's door this time but slowly turned the handle and cracked it open just enough to see you tenderly holding her toughened feet. I watched you. You were wearing a light blue cotton dress shirt that hugged your broad back. Your head was bent downward, and the soft light in the room cast a glow around you. I could have loved you forever. I imagined you lifting me off the ground and kissing me, deeper and deeper until I sank. But you were oblivious of me, leaning over your mother. You gently ran a washcloth over her feet one at a time, carefully cleaning between the toes and around the swollen ankles. She was laid out like a corpse in the waning light. Her stiff hair looked

like white cotton candy against the pillow; her hands folded over her stomach, clutching a rosary. "*Mio Antonio*," she sighed as I pulled the door closed.

"Tony," I whispered, and I began to cry as I walked to the elevator, carrying my bag and suitcase.

I climbed into the waiting taxi, and I looked back at the hotel as we pulled away. I imagined you sitting beside her bed, speaking Italian. Softly whispering the rosary with her in the fading light. And when you said the last *Ave Maria*, she placed her hand on your head in benediction. And you bowed in oblation, both of you reciting prayers to the Holy Mother.



Christina Williams
Pencil

Pablo
Elizabeth Bridges

The sleepers are in a soft grey world

Tucked away in houses
Like toys in boxes
With their muscles soft and unbuckled.

Grandfather, I don't think you're dead yet.
You're keeping me awake
With noises in the kitchen.

When I saw you, I saw only
The size of your form --
Bear-like, a gentle tower.
I missed completely your hands, so clumsy with
Silverware and glasses.
Only in this late-night fuzz
With the sky and stars unfocused as static
Do I hear the frustrated fumbblings
And think of your watery eyes
And shudder: I don't remember their color.

Even with your ghost
Begging me out of bed
You're already erasing away,
And no photograph will revive your sweet-mountain voice,
The way you said my name,
A lullaby in itself.

Hot-Air Fantasy

Elizabeth Bridges

At lift-off,
The sandbags are gathered
In lean, brown-knuckled fists the color of earth,
To be selected and lobbed
Back towards the vanishing checkerboard fields
Of grain and soil and concrete.
When the voyagers feel gravity doing its mother-tug
On the wicker-worked angel, they ride
For the blue and the bluer.

The best part comes
When they feel the snapping of the strings,
When their vessel slips out of bounds
Like a wet, bald baby
Snipped from the womb.

And home is defined
In the heartbeat beyond mortal limbs.
Beyond clouds feathering thin and scalloped high,
To where the tip-top of the stratosphere
Crowns them with stars,
Shoots them up the veins of the galaxy,
And taxis them straight ahead
To the gaping black maw
Of God.

Everything Between
Elizabeth Bridges

I remember the wild, white-haired guy
Who collected the rarest of moths in his shack,
And refused them even the slightest scrap of sky,
And would watch them for hours as they tried to get back --

Back to the feather-scraped stretches of stratosphere,
The ephemeral span of a day burned in flight,
And the limber shadows, showing things graced to the fear:
"Any hand can conduct your goodnight."

So, they flit through the wooden, candle-lit shell
Under the gaze of his bright, busy eyes;
The space beyond the door describing both heaven and hell,
Two tales interlocked and suspicious as lies.

They candle-dance forever, the chain unbending --
Yet all stories bound to the promise of ending.

Pirates
Elizabeth Bridges

Even in the thick sap of summer
Things are dying --
Even you, as I watch:

A battle of pirates
Rumbling over dark waters;
The old peg-leg is howling
"Shiver me timbers" in the fog
While Polly blinks blandly, lets it happen.
The peg-leg is you,
The dumb bird is me --

I have catch-phrases and chicken soup to spare,
I have your gnarled and shaking hand clutched uselessly in
mine.
The battle continues; there is a fistful of doubloons
At stake for every pillager
And swashbuckling bluebeard.

For us there is the raging bitch of the
Long-winded sun, the sticky stretch
Of June and July and August, all the
Calendar's hot-boxed days collapsed into
One long moan.

Where are your doubloons?

I bring you water in a meticulously cleaned cup,

Deftly cut sandwiches to lie untouched
Beside the orderly sanctuary
Of your fresh-linened bed.

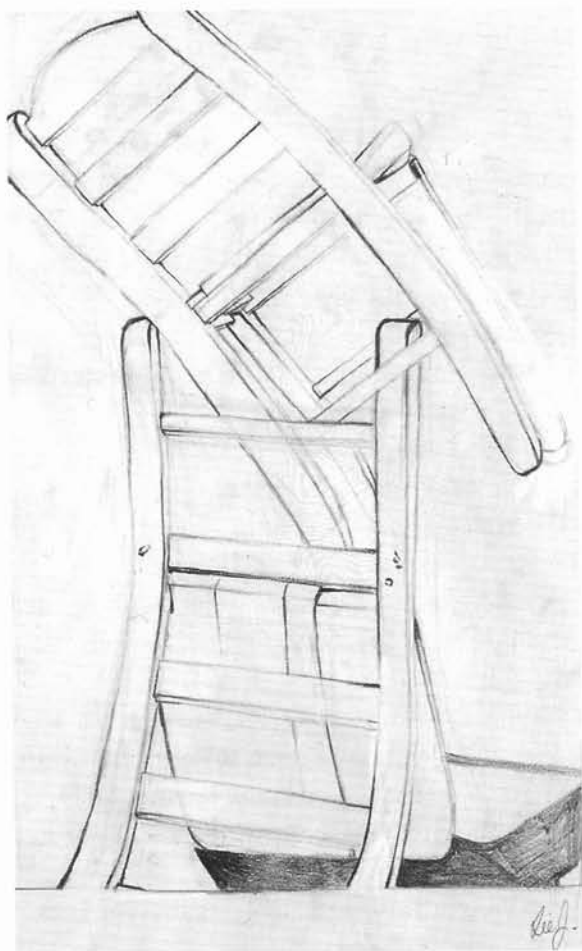
But these are parlor tricks for a blind man --
Rabbits out of hats.
Nothing unsinks your ship.

The battle ends when autumn swoons in,
Lays a cool hand on the deep lines of your brow --

The pirates take the party elsewhere,
I watch you shiver your embers --
Shiver, and ash, and out:
An empty ocean.
The waves reflect nothing but
A bald and naked sky --
The black milk of your doused pupils.

I Think
Elizabeth Bridges

I think sometimes that I haven't had
The sort of life that evokes poetry --
But there are sweet, breezy days
That dissolve into cool-capped nights
With every bit of roadside nature --
Dogwood, kudzu and pine, all murmuring to itself,
Keeping small secrets from me --
Then I try to bend images
into some honey-flavored melancholy,
I try like a bad desperate artist
Who grips the smooth grain of his brush,
Narrowly eyes its oily black hairs, thick against a textured
Canvas, and thinks that with all this rich wonder about,
Something of art must spring
from his slow, deliberate strokes.
Maybe if I shape it with delicious, mysterious words --
I unroll a delectable list: epistrophe, arcane, lucid,
Periwinkle, the liquid eye, the quivering bodies of rabbits and
the kiss of milk on a lonesome glass.
Sometimes a violent flower presents itself, and I script it out,
Unfurl it lovingly, read and reread
With breathless attraction: I grew you.
You happened out of my dark, aching throat,
You were birthed of my cramping hand.
I name it miracle,
I wait, wived to its ephemeral promise
On my moth-lit porch,
Pen clutched at the holster.



Lee Johnson
Ebony Pencil

Telico
Gabrielle de Gray

A tree stands in the cool sunlit morning,
Its branches laden with ice.
Untouched snow blankets the ground.
Coldness bites the air.
Silence abounds in the stillness of morning.
Where the creek curves beside a snow covered bank,
My eyes soak in the splendor of winter's first snow.

Grapefruit
Cory Grundy

I hold it in my hand,
this round and perfect shape,
like the world.
It is smooth and shiny,
the color of the sun in the first stages of setting,
a fiery pinkish yellow.
I slice it in half and examine the interior.
I see a pie
cut into several, individual slices.
I lift one of the halves to my nostrils.
The aroma -- refreshing
like the scent of newly mown grass
following an April shower.
I gingerly proceed to dig out a bite
with my round tipped
silver shovel
and place the sample
on my awaiting tongue.
Closing my eyes as the pulp bursts
inside my mouth,
I feel the squishy, jelly-like texture
of the grapefruit.
The juice flows over my taste buds
overwhelming their sensations.
It is different.
It is sour.

Comet
Amanda Holcomb

It's my witching hour;
a tremendous fanfare: they're calling to me
to let them search the vast emptiness for their
fantastic dreams.

My fairy hides behind the shallow moon --
shouting the colorful madness rising in the
air, sitting like a cloud of smoke in a crowded room.

The motion
sliding back and forth
sliding forth and back.

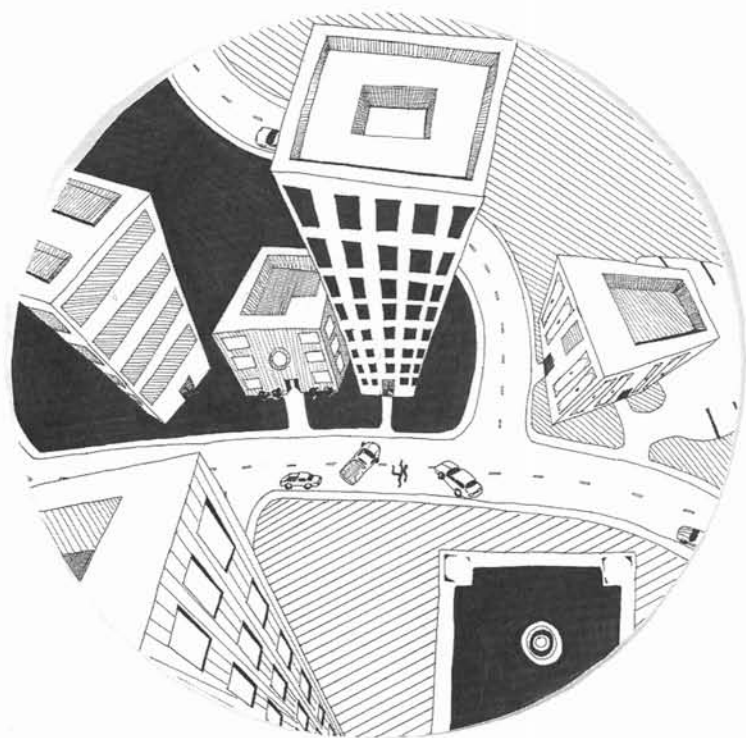
What's the fever for? A representation of the
absence of pain?

A calloused intercourse or a saint on the rack?

It's my wildest hour,
before the sun dares to show her
shining face,
even before the radiance of the new days ahead
come along to mock my fantastic dreams;
when only my fortunate failures leave a dusty trace.

Divorcee
Morgan MacFarland

Over forty and with a date,
Legs unshaved since '68.
Post-divorce, the kids are grown
It's up to me and me alone.
In my youth, I bought the bit
About love and family -- all that shit.
He bought it too, it sounded groovy,
What was that Redford/Streisand movie?
The Way We Were, the way we are,
I start from scratch and start my car.



Mark Mitchell
Pen and Ink

Bellacre Woods

Tim Heaton

It's all a matter of breathing, Ben thinks wryly, as he listens to his brother's exhalations with a practiced ear. IN, three second pause, out, IN, three second pause, out again. He knows he is fine when the mumbling begins, and the stretching beneath the covers, his brother trying to find even more space in his labored dreaming. In the bedroom they share are two dressers, both of them scratched from age and use, a closet stacked full of more linen than they could possibly use in their lifetime, a small television, and the bed they lie on. Scattered about the floor, in piles and disjointed fragments, are most of the clothes they own. We are a messy bunch, he thinks, and his grandmother is right. It is a disgrace to leave our clothes this way. But then, he reasons, we are young and full of spit. This is the normal way of things.

He hears his grandmother coughing in the next room, a dry, choking heaving which winds its way around the house like a tubercular serpent; in the corners, high above his head, he swears he can see the stains left by said creature, mustard yellow streaks which blend in the shadows and come to life if the light is just so. He shudders and turns away and listens some more.

She is old, and frail, not as full of salt and vice as she had been, like in the days he and his brother had first come here. She was ancient even then, Grandma Jones was, and her withered face had become set, like stone, like some monument to a way of life and thinking one finds bronzed, worshiped, and ignored. She had contemplated them, that day

years ago, down her long sloped nose. Like aiming a gun.

She moves about, and he can hear her using her chamber pot, a disgusting relic of a time and culture she refuses to do away with; it is ingrained in her, like breathing. He and his brother had long ago sworn off cleaning the damn thing, regardless of the threats she hurled and spat their way. She carries it even now, down the hall to the bathroom where she empties the thing in the commode. In his thoughts, she is all draft and smoky mist; she is old and will be asleep soon.

It is cold in this house and still. As much as he dislikes the bed, it is warm and soft, and his brother's body is a comforting hulk pressed into his back. It is even colder out there, he reasons to himself; he can hear the wind picking up and the pine trees scraping against the roof, their limbs like monstrous fingers against the tin. Yes, it would be warm and safe in this bed, and here I'll stay, he thinks, even as he pulls back the covers and slowly, carefully, climbs from the mattress and the bed. He tucks his pillow into the space where he was, soothes the covers smooth. His brother moves an arm and mumbles beneath his breath but does not wake.

Quickly now, his thin body shivering, Ben pulls on his long johns and jeans, flannel shirt, cotton socks. His tennis shoes barely fit around his feet anymore. He moves to the closet and finds his coat, a thick, brown, ugly thing which his grandmother insists he wear. He had withstood many a taunting laugh in this thing, burying his face behind its high collars but had become quite attached to it; so much so that when she suggested they replace it, he steadfastly refused.

He slips it on and buttons it tight, right up to the collar. He moves surely now, out into the hallway, past the bathroom with its pulsing, humming light, past the portraits and pictures of people he doesn't know anymore and doesn't care to. He pauses at his grandmother's door and takes a deep breath to calm himself. She is curled up on her bed, steadfast and still, snoring gently.

He finds her money jar on a shelf in the kitchen and takes a couple of dollars from it, a handful of quarters and dimes he dumps into the inside pocket of his coat. From the refrigerator he takes a can of Coke and two eggs, which he gingerly wraps in tissue and places on top of the change. The can he wraps in a handkerchief, and he wishes to God for a pair of gloves.

He dares not go out the front, for he would be visible from her bedroom window. He pads his way to the back door and stops for a minute, listening, and silently takes the old key off the hook on the wall. The lock turns without sound, for it is worn and oiled. He steps into the night air quickly, locking the door behind him.

Their house is in a valley, an angled depression in the earth which is cut along its width by a small road and along its breadth by a series of barren fields, crisscrossed and interlaced by taut lines of shrubbery. On the valley hills the kudzu vines reflect the gray moonlight, like dead patches of silver skin. There is too much light, he realizes, too late. In his chest the fear rises and plunges like black swallows.

He moves across the yard like a bound cat, alternately running and crouching, scanning the path behind him. He watches the windows of his house, hoping they stay darkened, praying they fail to blaze in surprise and indignation. This has been too easy, he thinks, and wonders at the same moment if he is being too superstitious. It hardly matters; his cousin's house looms out of the darkness, ghostly, white, and still, the windows as dead and black as his own, the frozen grass sparkling like captured stars. He slows and peers into the darkness, listening so intensely that he can hear his blood pounding in his ears. From the tree line comes a whistle, a sweet, chilling chime he and his cousin have practiced over and over again. He answers back and finds his cousin a moment later.

His cousin's name is Mark, and he steps from the

woods and dark, dark valley with long, tender strides. Mark is full-limbed and gaunt, and his eyes burn, lit from within with a fire which neither parent nor guidance counselor nor cousin can understand, or diminish, though more than a few have tried. His demeanor is angry and sullen; yet he wields his anger in a union of concentration and restraint, so much so that his flashes of reason are intense and spectacular, like fireworks against a cloudy sky. Mark is brutally intelligent, his wit and force of will having been sharpened from years of excursions such as this one, a nocturnal urge he has honed and nurtured since the age of ten. He is all of fifteen years old now but could pass for twenty in a pinch.

Mark studies his younger cousin, Ben, for a moment and watches the moon against the January clouds, sharp and clear in the stinging air. He fetches a cigarette from his coat pocket and fires it with a snap of his lighter.

"Do you want one?" he whispers. Ben shakes his head and points to Mark's house.

"Shouldn't we be gettin' a move on?"

"Doesn't matter. If they wake up now, we're dead anyway, you know? You scared?"

Ben cracks a smile and shakes his head. He is thinking of his grandmother, asleep in her house which creaks and moans, asleep behind the bone white pillars and cinder blocks.

"Not anymore. I ain't. Where are we going tonight?"

"Don't know yet. Got to find some pot somewhere."

"What the hell do you need a pot for?"

Mark's face dips in a scowl on one side, a smirk on the other. He exhales a stream of smoke like a snake emitting venom, straight into Ben's face and eyes.

"Not a *pot*, *some* pot. Jesus, don't you listen?"

Ben nods silently, causing the frown to appear again.

"You boys taking good care of Granny? You know I won't like it if you aren't."

Ben shrugs. "She's not easy to live with."

Mark's voice is high pitched, and a little nasal, and rises so when he is angry, like now.

"I don't give a shit. She took you in when no one else would. Takes care of you. You should be a little more grateful. You better be good to her."

"I try to."

His anger passes as swiftly as it comes, and he studies Ben's downcast eyes with a seed of guilt in his belly. He taps him on the shoulder and laughs.

"I know you do. Where do you want to go?"

"Don't care. Some place warm."

They take the trail through the backwoods, a sloping streak of dirt that winds through an orchard of apple trees, behind the Davis farm, and back to the road. They travel quickly, stopping only once to listen for the hunting dogs the Davises keep in a pen. The boys crouch low on the frozen earth, listening and watching.

Their neighbors are a suspicious sort, vengeful and paranoid, the owners of a variety of weapons. It would not be a novelty, in fact, for someone to shoot at them. They have been, several times in fact, saved by the degree of laxity and drunkenness for which their neighbors are infamous. Still, it is wise to be prudent and diligent. They wait ten minutes in this fashion, before stepping onto the road and continuing on.

The valley rises in a steep taper at this end, with an incline of forty-five degrees. It is tough going, and they take their time. Mark stops about halfway up and lights a cigarette.

"Smoke break," he gasps, breathing heavily, "sure you don't want one?"

"No thanks. Know where we're going?"

"Yeah," Mark nods. "First, I figured we'd go see Dick Burns. He might have some liquor or money or something. He'll be drunk off his ass for sure. When he

passes out, we can take his car for a little spin."

"Where to?"

"Doesn't really matter. Where do you want to go?"

Ben considers this slowly, while the gloom of night presses ever heavier upon the very air about them, and the pavement he is sitting on bleeds raw cold into his flesh. He rubs his thighs and calves, stands and jumps a bit.

"Anywhere but here. I'm freezing."

"Amen to that."

They crest the hill and smile to each other at the sight they see below: a great subdivision, dozens and dozens of white, yellow, and blue lights fluttering like the pulse of some crouching, translucent beast. It is down there where life surges and time takes on some degree of meaning, where drugs and beer and girls all await them in some quantity, as do the police and angry parents and possible injury and even death. But far better than what waits below, Ben thinks, is what waits behind them: blackened hole of a valley, with the dead and undead, and the dry skin of an old woman to flail at you.

He is feeling warmer already, and the two of them watch the lights for a while, glittering good as gold.

Dick Burns' house can wait; on their way they scale a maple tree positioned perfectly on the property line between two houses, each of them containing a number of teenage girls with a propensity for leaving their shades up and their clothes off. There is nothing to see tonight, however. Just a woman at her kitchen sink applying hair coloring solution. She dowses her head and starts the egg timer and stares out the window without blinking into oblivion.

Dick Burns has company. They can hear them before the house is in sight, two female voices, which laugh and crash about. When Mark knocks on the door, the silence inside comes too quickly, and there is a momentary lapse before the door opens.

A girl is standing there, fifteen or so, torn jeans and tight t-shirt. She stares at them, and her lips curl into a half moon, and she smells of whiskey and old cigarettes.

"Can I help you'all?"

Her drawl of a voice slides over them like syrup, all honey smooth and brown in the porch light. From the living room Dick bellows, his ruined throat well oiled with liquor.

"Who the hell is it?"

"A couple of. . . boys." She smiles again.

"Well, what the hell do they want?"

Mark pushes his way in, with Ben close behind; they find Dick sprawled on his back, on his filthy-expensive Persian carpet, a bottle of Jim Beam balanced precariously on his chest. Straddled above him is a girl even younger than the one who answered the door. In her right hand she holds a box of prunes; she drops them one by one into his yawning mouth below.

Dick sees them and guffaws, spewing half chewed prune and saliva.

"Goddamn, it's Mark and his cousin." He takes a deep breath, for even the smallest exertions wear him thin. "I ain't gonna be responsible for you shitheads, you understand? I got enough trouble of my own!" His voice shakes the walls of the house, and the two girls stare at each other, wide-eyed and afraid at his change of manner.

Mark holds up a placating hand and smiles. "I'd say these two hussies are a lot more trouble than we are, wouldn't you, Dick? And I bet we come a lot cheaper."

Dick's eyes are bloodshot and filmy. They narrow like the gasping mouth of dying fish and move from one girl to the other, as if seeing them in a new light. He holds out his hands.

"Come on. Pull me up."

Which they do and steady him between them. Dick is a big man, well over six feet, with a thick bull neck and hams

drink and self-pity and Persian carpets all too easy to lie upon. Dick is a fighting man, and will fight you good for all of ten minutes. But that is all he has in him, ten minutes worth. His ex-wife will laugh when she tells you.

Dick is fifty-five years old, but looked seventy.

He staggers to his bathroom and slams the door shut, while Mark and Ben study his companions for the night, two young girls who nervously avert their eyes and study the paintings on the wall, paintings Dick's ex-wife commissioned from one of her numerous lovers.

"You girls know Dick a long time?"

"We met him tonight," the one with the prunes says, "at the drugstore."

"Yeah," says the one by the door, "at the drugstore. We was just minding our business when he starts talking to us, offers to buy us beer and everything. He invites us back here, says he wants to have a party." She shrugs. "We ain't got nothing better to do."

Mark nods slowly, his eyes never closing or leaving them. "Uh huh. What's your names?"

"Tracy and Tammy."

"Which is which?"

The girl with the prunes drops them and giggles. "I'm Tammy. That's Tracy over there."

Tracy bursts into laughter and holds her hand over mouth, for Dick has returned from the bathroom with his pants unzipped and his cock hanging out, uncircumcised, huge, and wrinkled, for the world to see. He blinks at their hoots of derision and scowls, until Mark stoically points out his error, and Dick grins as well and does nothing to correct himself. He is an old fool, Ben thinks with grim satisfaction, and it will be a pleasure stealing everything I can get my hands on.

Suddenly, Dick pitches face-forward onto the floor and knocks himself out cold. The job of pushing his penis

back in his pants and zipping them up falls to Ben, for Tammy and Tracy will have nothing to do with it, and Mark is determined to torture his cousin at least once tonight.

"I'm not going to do it," Ben says.

"Yes, you will," Mark says firmly, "or I'll beat the shit out of you."

Ben does as he is told.

Tracy has discovered a half empty bottle of tequila, and the four of them sit in a perfect rectangle passing the bottle, with a comatose Dick at their feet. Mark takes a huge mouthful and spits it all over him.

"How long have you known him?" Tammy asks, her eyes glistening, her legs thrown over the high arm of the chair. Mark studies her thighs and thoughtfully scratches his chin.

"About a year or two. I mowed his yard last summer. He gave me beers instead of money. We hit it off." He shrugs. "He's an old fool with too much of everything."

"That's awful mean to say. I kind of like him."

"You don't know him like I do. You don't know a goddamned thing."

Tammy blinks in surprise and confusion and frowns. She is very pretty, Ben finds himself thinking.

"Why are you being so mean?" she asks diffidently. She does not look at him.

Mark leans forward in his chair and flicks a finger at her. "Cause I know you. Tammy Brown, right? Buddy Brown's sister aren't you? I've seen you around, though you may not know it. I know you."

"You don't know me."

"I know you. You're a liar, a thief, *and* a whore. Your mom threatened to send you off to the nut house, didn't she? Buddy says you'll screw anything and steal whatever's left. It wasn't Dick's idea for you to come here. It was yours, wasn't it?"

Tammy stands and stretches and wrinkles her nose like a cat sniffing something mildly unpleasant.

"And I know you, Mark Browning. You're a thief and a liar, too. I know why you're here tonight, believe me. It's too bad the asshole got too drunk too fast."

"I think it's time for you girls to be leaving."

They pull on their blue jean jackets and wrap their mufflers tightly around their necks. Tammy stands by the open door and peers out into the night, sniffing the chilled air into her lungs, and shudders.

"Too cold for us to be walking. My house is at least a mile from here. Can't you give us a ride or something?"

Mark takes them by the arm and heaves them out the door, both of them too astonished and afraid to do more than scream.

"Should have thought of that before you picked up old Dick," he says with a grin, before locking the door. "I sure as hell did."

Twenty minutes later, a sneaking wind comes from the west, skimming atop the Tennessee River before making its way south. It caresses Dick's house. Stalking and splendid, it spews its breath against the windows in vain, eager to join and vanquish the warm souls ensconced inside. Ben breathes a sigh of relief and touches the window, leaving a ragged hole in the ice, which quickly heals itself again.

Dick is awake and on a rampage. He can't find his whiskey or scotch, and he is feeling the ache of sobriety, hitting him just below the belly button.

He bends over in pain and takes a few, quick breaths.

"Are you okay? Want some milk?" Mark is smiling when he says so, and Dick shakes his head, before latching onto an ashtray and sending it winging.

"I want something to *drink*," he moans.

"There's nothing here." Ben's voice is flat, matter-of-fact, and unfeeling.

"How about a nice glass of Kool-aid?"

"You little bastard."

"Sorry, Dick."

"Bring me my coat. I guess we'll have to get some."

Dick slides into his coat, like wet paper on gravel. It is stained and reeks of mildew. Vomit, Ben thinks.

"I know that! We're going some place else."

The wind is stronger now, and shrewd, and slips up their jackets to caress their skin with its burning fingers. Ben turns his collar up even higher and buries his face deeper, thinking of anything but his bed and the time. Ahead of him Dick weaves and stumbles, his coat open to the air and flapping. He's still drunk enough to be numb, but sober enough to think about it.

"Dick, Jesus Christ, button up your damn coat. I ain't gonna haul your frozen ass all over creation," Mark says tiredly. He watches the moon through the clouds for a moment and announces the time.

"Almost two in the morning."

Dick winces into the sky and shakes his head. "How in the hell do you know that?"

"I just do. Where we going, Dick?"

Dick points ahead, to the dark hills and trees looming. "Down into the valley. See a friend of mine."

"That's where we live, Dick. We don't want to go there."

Dick draws himself up and balls up his fists. His voice comes in a sputtering rage, roaring red rockets in the night.

"Is that so? I DON'T GIVE A SHIT! Do you hear ME? I DON'T GIVE A SHIT! You wanna drink? HUH? You wanna get high? HUH? Then you'll go where I go, won't cha', you LITTLE BASTARD!"

They rush to him and hold out their hands to soothe his anger. Dick pushes them away and staggers wildly down

the street and into the woods, crashing and flailing at stiff limbs which strike his face, growling through his nose, ears, and teeth. Mark holds both hands to his head and moans in disbelief.

"What are we going to do?" Ben breathes; "He's waking up the whole place."

"Well, we can't leave the sonofabitch out there. He'll freeze." Mark thinks about it for a second, rubbing his lean jaw with the cuff of his coat. He looks so old, Ben thinks, and remembers what his grandmother told him once:

"That Mark," she says, as she dips her snuff v-e-r-y carefully into the corner of her mouth, "is fifteen going on thirty. I seen it happen before. I just want you to remember that next time you go gallivanting around the countryside." And then she spit, perfectly, into a tall aluminum can.

They leave the road and wind their way among the oaks and pines, feet crunching on the needles and leaves. Dick's trail is not hard to follow over the split limbs and chewed, blackened earth. Ahead of them is always Dick's low, incessant moaning. They come upon a driveway, overgrown and shadowy in the dim light, and ahead is Dick, silhouetted against the charred frame of a burned-out house, his back against the chimney. He is happy to see them.

"Hey, boys," he says cheerfully and blows them a kiss. "I missed you."

Ben studies the black timbers rearing against the sky and trembles. He has heard of this place, knows something terrible happened here long ago. He has never been here before, has never had the nerve. He is intelligent and wise beyond his few years; yet his soul still retains echoes of his childhood, which rise, fleetingly, to comfort him. Or horrify. He has been afraid to come here, content enough to stand on a hill in the distance and study the place safely, through binoculars.

But now the ghosts have stirred in his spine, and he

shudders, but not from the cold. He has never been this close to death, and he smells it, like sweet cloves.

Mark has, and he is confused. He shakes his head.

"What are you doing here, Dick? Trying to raise the dead?" Mark is nonchalant and calm, but he keeps his back turned to the rickety remains which tower over them. Dick laughs, his eyes and teeth glowing like embers.

"You know what happened here, don't ya?"

"Yes. I was about five, I think. I remember the fire truck, the siren. It was in the wintertime. Christmas. We could see the lights from our front porch."

"I saw the whole thing. You want to hear about it?"

"Not especially."

"I was driving home, late at night. That was when I worked you know; I wasn't the damned BUM I am today. I could see the windows first. . . ." Dick places both his hands against his face, as if trying to draw the images in from a long, hard distance. He closes his eyes.

"The windows. They were orange, that was what was wrong. I could see them through the trees, and I thought they were beautiful, cause it was Christmas, you know? I thought, how in the hell did they get those windows lit up like that? But then I smelled the smoke, and it hit me." Dick shakes, from head to toe. "I was the first one here. I saw it all, the whole thing."

He points a finger to the ground, close by the frame of the front door.

"She hit right there, right in front of me. Still on fire, a little bit. When I grabbed her arm, the skin slid right off. She couldn't talk, just kept motioning to the house and screaming."

On the door frame, on the wood, Ben can see the tearing holes.

"I put her out and kicked in the door, but it was no damn good. Fire everywhere, and smoke. I could hear them."

"Hear who?" Ben says quietly. Fear and dread build like smoke, just as it must have billowed that awful night so long ago.

"The children," Dick says flatly and turns his eyes on them, not so bright anymore, but dull like cool coals. "I could hear them upstairs. They were calling for her, and I couldn't help them. Nobody could. They screamed and screamed, and I couldn't help them." Dick's hands drop and his breaths come shallow. "I could see them against the windows, and they wouldn't move. I yelled to them, and they wouldn't move. Three of them, too scared to do anything. Burned to death, and I saw the whole thing."

"It wasn't your fault, Dick. You tried."

Dick nods and smiles. "I tried. It wasn't my fault. That's what the fire chief said. My wife said the same thing, you know. 'It wasn't your fault.' I loved my wife, and she said that to me."

He begins to sob, quietly, tears frozen as soon as they touch his skin.

"I loved her so much; you know that don't you?" He is imploring to them, two young men, boys really, who can't help him and can't respond, who can only bob their heads and stare. "I loved her more than my life. More than her life. You know, I offered to have her killed once?"

Mark's eyes are colder than they have ever been. "Yeah, you offered five thousand dollars to me, asshole. I wanted ten, but you had to be cheap. I would've done it, too. For ten."

To Ben's ultimate dismay and horror, Mark rears back his shoe and kicks Dick as hard as he can, right above the rib cage, and continues to assault him with a flurry of blows which come quick and hard. Ben's eyes are frozen, and his mouth is open, till Dick groans once loudly bends over him and grabs his hair.

"You're a lousy sonofabitch, Dick," he whispers, "and

it's time for you to die. I'm tired of having to look at you, smell you. Hell, everything about you makes me want to puke. Your wife did the right thing, boy. Just leave her in peace."

He lets him go, and Dick collapses into a huddle of floppy arms and coat. He makes the effort to raise his head and smiles at them.

"It's not the living, boys, that gets to you," he says, and spits out a hunk of blood, "it's the place. It's this valley, this town. I've lived here so long I feel like my guts are rotting right through. It's South Knoxville; it's so cold here; I've never understood why it's so damn cold here. But I do now."

He goes silent then, staring at trees, and through them, till his eyelids falter and close and he shrugs off to sleep, his head planted firmly against his chest. Ben shakes him, and reflexively, to his horror, gives him a kick.

"What are we going to do?" he asks.

"Nothing."

"Nothing at all? Shouldn't we carry him back to his house at least? He'll freeze to death out here."

"That's what he wanted."

Mark rifles through Dick's jacket and finds his wallet, stuffed with twenty dollar bills. He slips it into his pocket and takes Dick's cigarettes as well.

He gives Ben a playful tap on the arm.

"Okay. Let's go."

The moon shines alone now; their street glows like silverfish, winding and thrashing through the valley. They smoke Dick's cigarettes and say nothing till they are finished.

Ben stamps his out on the pavement with both feet. "I'm going home now. Getting late."

Mark's face is like a string being drawn tight. He motions to the lights spread before them, banquet-like, ready to be gorged and raped, and tries to smile.

"Look, we got a lot of time left. And a lot to do."

"I'm too tried. I'm sorry. Grandma's going to be gettin' up soon."

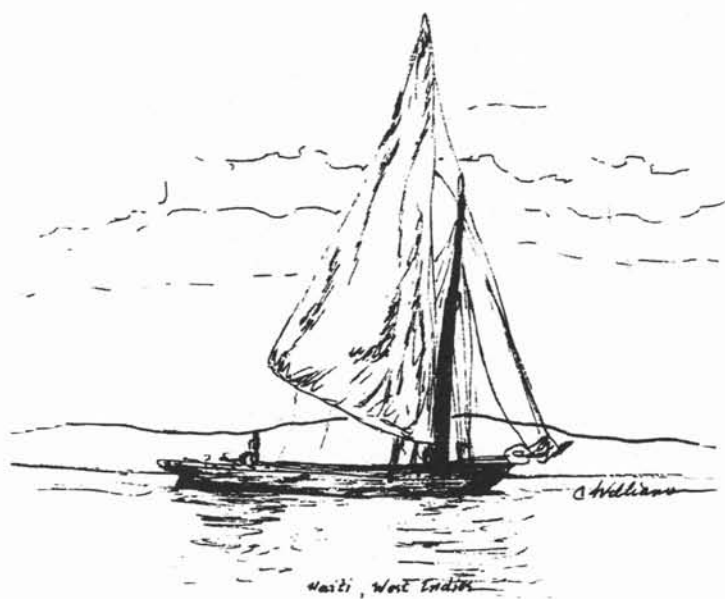
Mark shrugs and nods. "You do what you want. You're missing out, though. I can show you a lot more stuff you wouldn't believe. Shit you never seen before. Crazy shit."

"No thanks."

Mark shrugs again. "Suit yourself."

On his way home Ben hears the sound of the valley at night, the creaking of the trees giving way to the wind, the dance of leaves kicked up and thrown, on the street, on the yards, back to the limbs which had spit them out. They rattle and dance like the spirits of so many dead bones. Like dead bones hung to dry in the coolest winter wind, they howl with the scream of children alone and afraid out here. He hears the whispering tones of the valley and hurries to the back door of an old, beaten house, where an old woman and her moans welcome him in blissful harmony.

That night the dreams come again, of albino fish, moon eyed and grinning, swimming silently in a black sea.



Christina Williams
Pencil

Plummet

Boongnune Vongkhamchanh

I would like to pull you underwater,
So we could share one final breath.
Above the sea your eyes never bother
To meet mine, but here in an icy death
We would sink like anvils into the sand.
Hooks from above cannot pull you away
As my tentacles twist and bind your hands.
The blue is stronger than the light of day.
Do you miss the sun falling into the sea?
Forget the surface world; this is better.
What is greater than plummeting with me?
Amongst the weeds we will stay forever.
Neptune cannot save you; hold your last breath.
Descend with me into an icy death.

Paper

Boongnune Vongkhamchanh

There is no paper left.
I have used it all:
Grocery bags,
Certificates,
Love letters,
Receipts.
I have glued them together
To make a large airplane,
In hopes of flying away.
But I have saved one last sheet,
The shopping list that I promised to fill.
It's still stuck to the refrigerator,
The magnet too strong
For my pencil-like arms.
I can't possibly complete the list.
When you come back,
I'll be gone.

Autumn
Boongnune Vongkhamchanh

Wind the clocks back,
And capture the day in mason jars
For memories are as fragile as cobwebs
In old men's hats.
Carve the orange gourds
And watch overripe apples
Melt in the sun.
Fly on a paper airplane
through brittle leaves.
In a box, capture the day;
Tie it with twine,
And label it:
"September's dismay."

Exasperating Edicts

Morgan MacFarland

"Give me some sonnets!" said Tom Sauret.

Sonnets are such a pain in the ass.

We, of course, complied -- serfs in debt

We wouldn't if not for the class.

I try to find a rhyme for "open"

As I watch a Little Joe on Bonanza

How about *mopin'*, *John Paul Pope-in'*?

Wearily, writing another stanza.

HA! I throw down my pen and run around nude,

Yodeling and beating my chest!

I feel a bit *saucy* and a bit *lewd*.

(I've apparently abandoned my quest.)

I slip on my notebook and fall with a *bump*

I fear I've got rug-burn

all over my rump.

**Jilted, I Sit Here With No Company Apart From My
VooDoo Doll.**

Morgan MacFarland

Had I been the jealous type,
 I'd have known from the start.
Had I muddled minor tripe,
 I'd have lanced his manly part.
Had my senses all been ripe,
 I'd have questioned the unknown.
Had I not ignored the hype,
 I'd have asked, "who's on the phone?"
Had I been the jealous type,
 I'd have shown chagrin.
Had I been the jealous type,
 I would have done them in.

The Obstruction at The Gallery

Morgan MacFarland

The audacity!
The presumption!
She stands directly in front of the exhibit.
We strain to see around her.
Staring at her head.
(My only view)
Set and lacquered,
Charcoal black,
To match her pants, to match her shoes,
A red woolen blazer,
Shoulder pads stacked high,
Creases as she *leans* left
And *leans* right.
Rude imperious impudence,
Obstructing others' view.
NEVER budging an inch.
I suck my cheeks in
And clench my nails into my palms.
The eclipse finally clicks away
In her Chanel-knock-off pumps,
Revealing a magnificent bust of antiquity.
I step back to marvel at every detail,
Every nuance.
How *could* she have seen it clearly,
Understood it up so close?
The tides in the crowd shift
And I am moved piece to piece to piece.
I look up at a large portrait --

A picture of a father and son,
Warm and comfortable.
I smile to myself and walk a bit.
I glance to the left
And see a rosy-cheeked woman,
Smiling in a sappy unison with me.
We turn and smile a "hello" at each other.
She turns and walks away,
In a red coat, black pants and shoes.

An Ode to Larry King
Morgan MacFarland

Larry, Larry talk-show guy,
Red suspenders -- hold 'em high!
Famed and infamous have flocked,
To Larry's show (most guests, half-cocked.)
Intensely, Larry interviews,
In sweat they all will pay their dues.
He makes a joke, he rakes the muck,
-- Well that's how Larry earns a buck.
He hardly ever pops his cork,
Just presses on, "Hello New York. . . !"

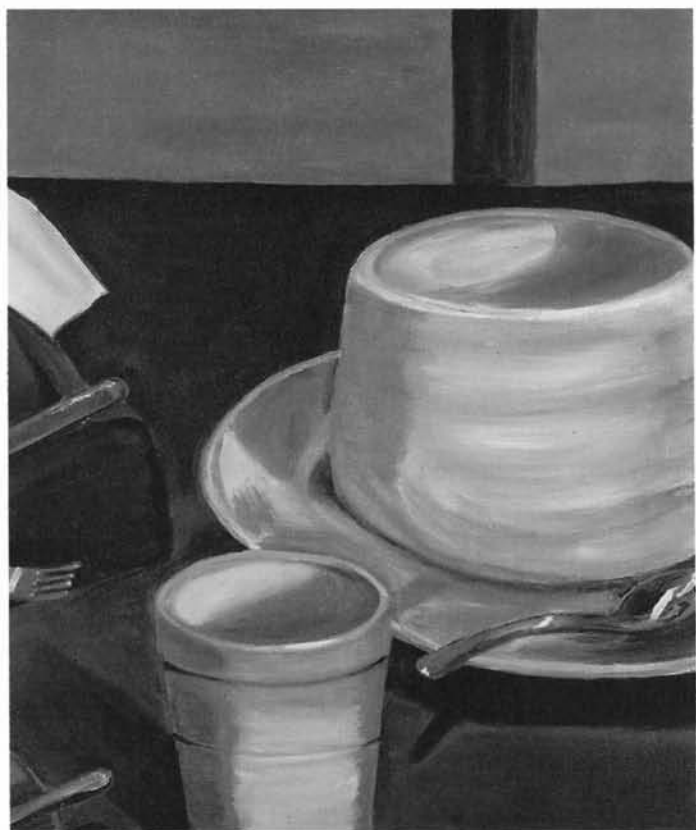
Spreadable Mr. Perfect
Morgan MacFarland

I sip my coffee and stare straight across
The restaurant at him
He sorta reminds me of that *Friends* guy, Ross.
Though, that reference sure makes me look dim.

No matter, he's cute. . .I should go say "hello,"
My curiosity grows.
I'm gawking unashamedly at this fellow,
Then he starts picking his nose.

I shudder, redirect my attention and ease
Into my bagel and Lox.
Why can't a man be more like cream-cheese(?)
Soft and smooth but kept in the ice-box.

I'd spread him on a variety of crackers
And never have to watch the Green Bay Packers.



Morgan MacFarland
Oil Painting

Minus
Elizabeth Bridges

It's two-thirty in the morning. I'm at the Waffle House where I used to work; and the nice waitress who got me a job here, so long ago, is finishing up her shift, watching the level of my coffee. Her name is Judy, and she does everything in a fit of goddess-charged finesse. She busses tables in one fell swoop and can silence any crying child by scooping him up and taking him with her as she circles the restaurant, filling coffee cups. She's my favorite waitress.

A cop who arrested a friend of mine once is in the booth behind me, and a friend from high school is two booths down, talking to a girl who used to hate me but doesn't anymore because we're older now. That's the way these things work.

The jukebox is playing her songs, Tom Petty and Melissa Etheridge and now Sheryl Crow, the new one. After that will be my song, Patsy Cline's "Crazy," which I've already prepared a cigarette for. It's the kind of song you smoke to; smoke wraps so beautifully around the lazy strains of her voice.

My friend who got arrested that one time is probably at home with the baby, my favorite waitress never stops working, and everywhere all over the world (which is humming softly tonight like a sentimental drunk) someone I once nodded to in passing is moving and breathing and going through the very same thing: the business of living.

I see my friends come in: Melissa, tall and dark-haired with a face perpetually bemused and distant; and Robert, who can go from sullen and brooding to jovial and

excited faster than a thirteen-year-old girl. They wave as they approach the booth and sit without a word. We could be together for hours, sometimes, without saying anything. It's a nice friendship. I never say I love anything, really, or hate anything, for that matter, but coffee is good, and cigarettes, and us together -- that's all good.

So now tonight is good.

My song's over, and now it's "Hotel California," which I think everyone has heard too much, but we'll probably make it anyway, at least tonight.

Friday night, eight-thirty, and Melissa and Robert are with me. We are all jaded and stony and laconic. We chain-smoke.

Robert is sometimes not so good at keeping quiet. He is fired up about the theory of chaos right now, as if he knew anything about it. Melissa is having a sneezing fit.

"Right there, see, Judy, how Mel's sneezing, right?"

Judy stares at him, leaning against our booth and counting tips. She has a way of staring at you without ever blinking that should be unnerving but isn't.

"So, say she were sneezing *outside*, okay? And so the tiniest bit of wind gushes out her mouth, and it goes and joins with a little breeze from whatever those little breezes come from, and those two winds join some more winds, and then more, all these tiny, *tiny* winds just adding and snowballing until, all of a sudden, there's a hurricane off the coast of Thailand."

He looks eagerly around the table. I flick my cigarette. Judy chuckles and whips a pack of Eve SuperSlim 100's out of her apron pocket. "All these little things, see?" He's quite into this. "They all add up -- they're all just waiting to be bigger."

Then Melissa says she's been thinking of moving to Arizona; so we talk about it, about the great sunsets there and

the price of gas and all the things she might do there, or we might do here, or anywhere, anything, until we're out of cigarettes.

This time it's earlier, one-thirty a.m. on a Sunday, and the after-church crowd has long since tucked themselves in bed, the taste of hash browns brushed from their sleeping mouths.

There's a new cook tonight, although I'm sure he's been doing this forever; they all have. He's short and squat with a huge mouth that's always quirked upwards, and a loud voice, always chiding the waitresses, calling aloud their names as if the names were jokes all by themselves: "Hey now, Judy! *Judy!*"

He wants to talk because it's his smoke break. He sits next to my booth and comments randomly until he can rope me into a conversation. I don't mind. I tell him I want to be a writer, because he asks.

"You gonna move to New York, get yourself a great big office up in the sky?" He laughs, not unkindly.

"No. Writers are poor," I tell him.

He nods. His hair needs cutting. "Guess it don't matter so long as you love what you do." His beefy grin flashes across his face like a lit match. "That's why I'm here, in this hellhole."

We laugh. It's a good joke.

Outside it's raining, which is perfect.

Monday, two in the afternoon, and I'm still tired from the night before. We're driving, Melissa and I, to pick up Robert. I sit in the passenger seat. It's my car, but I hate driving. I like to just lean back and watch the scenery roll past, like a silent movie. Not Melissa. She wants speed, she wants to hug the curves and feel the distance, her distance, the space her speed creates between here and there.

"I'm gonna do it." She keeps her eyes fixed on the road like she's starving and it's supper. I'm watching my little patch of sky, which is clear and stationary. "I really am. Robert's not going. He loves to talk about it, you know, to talk about anything far off and improbable. So I go, I get my ticket to Arizona, and suddenly it's too real. He won't talk about it anymore. It's not just some innocuous little fantasy." Her lips and jaw are set in some strange, hard shape I've never seen before. She doesn't look at me at all, just keeps eating up the road with her eyes. "So what do you think?"

The sun's going full force, turning up the volume of everything. I have to shield my eyes and look away from the sky. "What are you going to do there?"

"What do I do here?"

"I don't know." I don't. I don't know what any of us do. Isn't that why we stick together? We're three, a lucky number. We don't have to do anything; we're good like this.

Funny -- Robert is always the noisy one, his imagination just a little to the north of reality. And Melissa's the one to leave, disrupt the peace.

We pull up to Robert's apartment. He's outside, leaning against his door, arms folded, and legs crossed. He's scowling.

Melissa grabs my hand under the dashboard, below his sight line. "You could go, too." The defector tempting the loyal. She's looking at me now, for the first time since we got in the car. I look away from her to watch Robert lope towards us. I try to picture it in reverse, like a tape rewinding: his facing us, going backwards, growing smaller.

"I don't think I can afford it."

She holds her gaze on me for a millisecond more. Then, staring straight ahead: "Whatever."

Robert hops in, and we peel off, to whatever.

It's a beautiful Thursday, six in the evening. It's beautiful in the annoying way that makes you feel you should

be running through cricket-filled fields and laughing and watching the moon plump up like a pig, if only you had the energy.

Robert is picking songs on the jukebox. That cop is here, at the bar, sitting stiffly on a stool with his eyes fixed forward like he's riding a crowded elevator.

Everything's the same. It's odd, how I never noticed how much time slips by in a numbing fog, each day welded to the next. I never noticed until Melissa left, and I counted: one day. Two. A week. A month. More. All the same. How much time drifted off like smoke beforehand, in the same fashion?

Nothing's the same.

Robert sits and drums his fingers on the table. Judy isn't here; some other lady brings the coffee. We drink it in silence, except for when the cook comes for his smoke break. It's the same cook. His name is John. We laugh at his jokes; he likes us.

As we're leaving: "When's Melissa coming to visit?"
"Sometime soon, I think."

It's the day after her plane was supposed to arrive, back from Arizona, and she should have hopped out -- smiling, tanned, maybe? I don't know. She was there for four months, so probably yes: a bit of a tan. We waited for a long time, at the airport, without worrying -- planes are late all the time.

Judy is leaning on our booth again, staring at Robert. He looks awful, and I suppose I do, too. But he sounds worse. He's wheezing, slightly.

It's very busy; all the booths are full. It's six a.m. or noon or eight-thirty or ten in the evening. A lot of people need refills. Judy goes to get them, slowly. The jukebox is booked up with twangy songs to last for a while, plus a few good ones. I sit quietly and concentrate on the good ones.

The Sheryl Crow comes on, the new one. At least I guess it's still new.

"We've been far, far away from here. . ."

Five minutes after midnight on a Tuesday, and I'm burning blank pages from my notebook. Each time one finishes burning I rip another one out and light it and put it in the ashtray. Judy watches me from the corner of her eyes as she wipes down the counter of the bar but doesn't say anything. She's nice like that.

It's her birthday, and I'm driving. She always drove because I wanted to watch the sky, but then she fell from it, and I'm afraid to look anymore.

No idea where I am. Another reason she always drove, I guess.

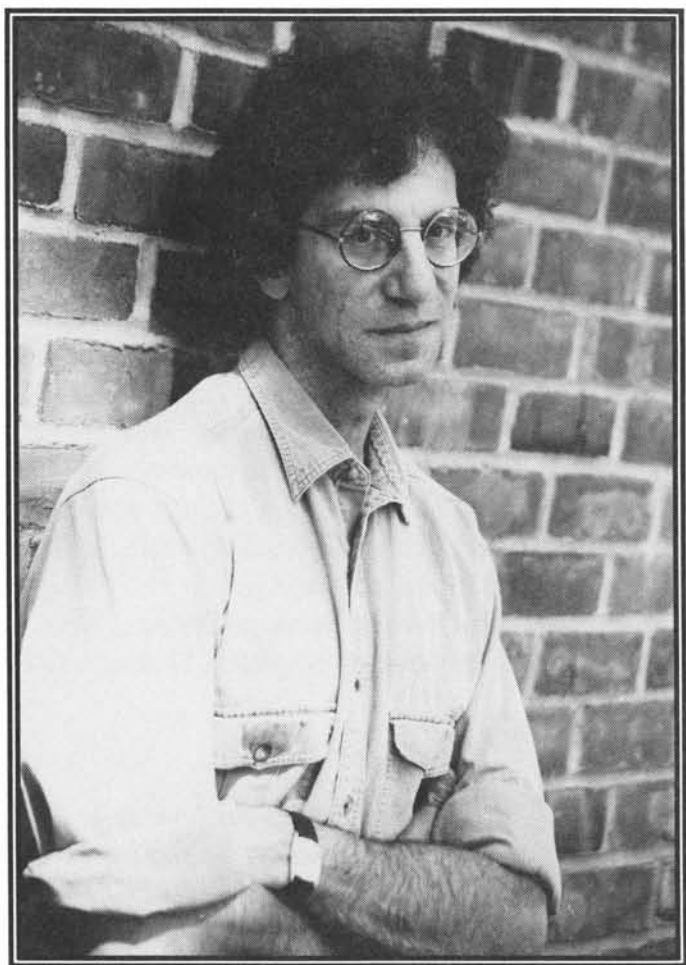
Did we ever celebrate birthdays? Not really. "Hey, it's your birthday, isn't it?" Yeah, okay, and that was all.

When we were in junior high, she wanted to be a veterinarian. We went to Myrtle Beach together once, in high school, and Robert got sunburned, all over, and she peeled his skin all the way home, laughing. She cut her hair really short once and hated it. None of us passed our driver's license test the first time. She used to love Duran Duran.

Backwards, forwards, this that -- nothing adds up, because it's all the past. Every second is the past. The beginning of any sentence is the past before you even reach the period. Everything subtracts; life is just the constant subtraction of time. I'm out of gas.

It's been two months now since her plane crashed, and I and Robert and this girl we met named Jenny or Jennifer or something are all going to Arizona. Melissa never wrote and said what it was like.

It might be better.



Steve Stern
Visiting Writer, November 1996

Steve Stern: Interview

Alfred Barker

Micki Licciardi

Steve Stern is the author of two novels, *Harry Kaplan's Adventures Underground* and *The Moon and Ruben Shein*, a collection of novellas, *A Plague of Dreamers*, and a collection of short stories, *Isaac and the Undertaker's Daughter*, which won the Pushcart Writer's Choice Award; its title story won an O. Henry Prize. *Lazar Malkin Enters Heaven*, another collection of short stories, won the Edward Lewis Wallant Award in 1987. He is presently working on another novel as well as a collection of short stories. While Steve was here, he conducted the creative writing class, gave manuscript consultations, and read a new short story, *The Tale of a Kite*. Steve lives in Saratoga Springs, New York, and is an Associate Professor of English at Skidmore College.

The Review: Thank you very much for coming to Georgia to conduct the lab and do the reading. Do you travel like this much?

Steve Stern: I have been a mercenary lately, taking jobs that pay, to be able to get time to write, but none of them have been as enjoyable as this one.

The Review: When you take time off, do you concentrate on your writing?

Steve Stern: Of course, of course. I have two books under

contract nearing completion. Actually, one of the drafts is about fifteen minutes away from completion, and it's hard walking away from it.

The Review: When you put together a collection of stories, do you put much thought in the ordering of the stories?

Steve Stern: I haven't given it much thought. The truth is no one is looking for short stories any more. There was this brief window after Raymond Carver and Bobbie Ann Mason struck a nerve. There was a bumper crop of books out, but I feel that has changed. I told my editor that I had another collection of stories; well, she said she couldn't give them away.

The Review: Do you see yourself writing more novels now than short stories, or are they something that you just can't let go of?

Steve Stern: This is my third novel, but the truth is I think I am a lot more comfortable with short stories. I like the form; I like the way you can contain the entire entity in your mind and become the absolute master of your world where you can't with a novel. You can deceive yourself with a novel. You can have sort of an aerial view, but once you get into it, you are surrounded, and you can't see your way out, which prevents you from ever having absolute control of every element of the story. At least short stories give you the sense or illusion of control.

The Review: You said you had fifteen minutes left on your draft. Do you write the draft out, or do you write and re-write because you said to me earlier you write a hundred drafts, then a hundred more. What is your method?

Steve Stern: Well, yes that's right. You first write the quick one; that's the sketch. Then the process is like creating a scene outside a window. It at first may appear to be two-dimensional, but as you re-write the scene, sometimes over and over again, the window becomes more clear, and the third dimension, or the ability to bring the reader into the work, begins to, if you're successful, happen. . . . These analogies are all insipid.

The Review: Do you write any poetry?

Steve Stern: No. I started in high school; in fact, that's the way I started writing. I refused to take anything seriously, so I started writing nonsense poems. I even remember some of them, but I won't recite any. It was at this time that I began to play with language; it was fun. I remember picking up James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* at the age of seventeen and watched the evolution of language in the book as it became more and more musical. It never occurred to me that prose could do what poetry could do.

The Review: We have often over the past three days discussed this desire within to write. Were you filled with this same desire?

Steve Stern: That's interesting. No, not really a desire, but possibly you might call it a dream, an inescapable dream. Who was I to think I could contribute anything to the literary conscience? I traveled across the ocean to get away from this dream, only to succumb.

The Review: How do you feel about those who want to make writing a career?

Steve Stern: Wow, writing and career are two words that don't seem to go well together. I can't even think of an analogy to describe their relationship. Most writers who write well find that writing is a compulsion. If they could, they would have chosen to have done something different. I'm not even comfortable putting it that way because it makes writing sound more romantic than it actually is. With me it was a conviction that was foolhardy, and all I did for quite a while was to mark time.

The Review: Did you feel as though your life began once you started writing?

Steve Stern: Yes, I'm afraid so. It's so paradoxical because experience ended and life began. I had experienced life; now it was time to experience books and experience dreams. The paradox of writing as a career can be found here as well. At some time the writer has to experience life to continue to write about life. If you don't, then a kind of atrophy takes place. One has to step out and experience reality. That is a reality that you can't control, unlike the reality that a short fiction writer creates that is under complete control.

The Review: You had mentioned to me earlier how at times you find yourself a counselor, coach, professor, and writer. Students want to know if they have what it takes. What do you tell them?

Steve Stern: First of all, I don't feel that I'm the one to say that they have it, or they don't have it. There have been many writers, some who are my friends, that seemed doomed with a lack of talent, but **BOOM**, found it, it seems, miraculously. I do try to help my students to focus on their writing, hoping if there is one thing that I can teach them, that would be to read, read, read. Really, time is one of those elements that I

find the most useful and yet at the same time destructive. If it doesn't kill you, it makes you stronger. But there is always one student that insists on being a writer, who's thin-skinned, and I find myself being counselor. You know all of these labels are just grotesque. All I want to do is write my stories, but I have to make a living.

The Review: That reminds me of a quotation that caught my eye. Byron wrote a letter to Percy Shelley concerning Keats' death. In it he said, "in this world of bustle and broil, and especially in the career of writing, a man should calculate upon his powers of resistance before he goes into the arena."

Steve Stern: That is so true.

The Review: We have discussed the more difficult side of writing, but how about the lighter side; is there one?

Steve Stern: Oh, sure there is. Writing can be very fulfilling for those that are compelled to be writers when something you write gets picked up for publication. Writers that are successful may find they have perks. It's nice to hear great things about what you have written. If the critics don't kill you, you might even have an audience. All of this helps. It's pretty validating. Yet, to hear harsh, negative feedback is enough to make some writers stop writing, and a bitterness can set in. I've seen this all the time. But, even with acceptance, the world can't justly compensate you for the amount of work that is required to be a successful writer, nor understand how much of yourself you pour into your work. The process of writing has to be the sustenance. If that doesn't do it for you, then nothing will.

The Review: With all of your experience as a professor, what is the biggest difference between the attitudes of the

students years ago and the students now? Is it what they are reading or not reading?

Steve Stern: Yeah, that's the really discouraging thing. It isn't that then they were reading and now they are not, but once there was a literary frame of reference in the classroom. Now I find movies and television shows have become the frame of reference, and my task has been to reverse this process. At times I feel like a doctor whose prescriptions are books. You know, read this and call me in the morning.

The Review: How do you define the difference between genre fiction and say literature?

Steve Stern: Literature defines the human conditions and speaks to the human heart and makes this sort of marriage, shot gun or otherwise, between heaven and earth. We would not know who we are if it weren't for these folks who shaped human experiences into some meaningful form. On the other hand, the type of writing that floods the market now is useful in its own way. It's entertainment, and as that goes, I had rather my students read than watch television. Because reading is the one thing we all can do, and if you find yourself compelled to write, the literary references one needs to write successfully are there as a part of one's own life experiences.

Elizabeth Bridges is an English Major at Gainesville College who doesn't really enjoy referring to herself in the third person.

Gabrielle de Gray is currently a student at Gainesville College majoring in Psychology.

Cory Grundy lives in Habersham County. She is an English Major at Gainesville College.

Tim Heaton currently lives in Oakwood. He is a sophomore Computer Science Major who enjoys writing stories.

Amanda Holcomb is a Psychology Major and an honor student formerly of Gainesville College.

Micki Licciardi is an English Major and the Editor of *Hoi Polloi* at Gainesville College. She lives in Oakwood with her husband and their two daughters.

Morgan MacFarland is a graduating art major at Gainesville College. She seeks to explore both writing and the visual arts in future vocations and avocations.

Boone Vongkhamchanh is a resident of Cornelia. He is majoring in Art and has found writing to be a form of art.

Contributors

The Gainesville College Writers' Contest for poetry was judged by Carol Wilson of Lander University, Greenwood, South Carolina. The fiction was judged by Steve Stern of Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York.

Elizabeth Bridges

First Place Poem: "I Think"

Third Place Poem: "Everything Between"

Third Place Story: "Minus"

Tim Heaton

Second Place Story: "Bellacre Wood"

Micki Licciardi

First Place Story: "Oblations"

Morgan MacFarland

Poetry Honorable Mention: "Divorcee"

Boone Vongkhamchanh

Second Place Poem: "Paper"

Third Place Poem: "Autumn"

Southern Literary Festival winners:

(Mississippi State University, April 3 - 5, 1997)

Boone Vongkhamchanh

Poetry Honorable Mention : "Paper"

The 1996 *Perceptions*

Literary Magazine: Second Place

Contest Winners

The Chestatee Review